

Risk, Resilience and Learning Disability: Strengthening The Resolve of Challenged Children

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All parents worry about their children's future. Given the events of this past year, concern about the future quality of life has been heightened. This worry is further fueled when parents observe their children struggling academically. Children and, for that matter, many adults mistakenly equate academic success with intelligence. When children are successful in school, parents are confident that their future will be bright. When children with learning disabilities struggle, parents worry. When they worry they are likely to seek help. Often the journey leads them to community resources; psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, and educators. Parents arrive at our offices with a list of academic problems, apprehensive that these problems, rather than representing normal stages of childhood, may be prophecies predicting significant future problems in the adult years. Their concerns are justified. Children with learning disabilities fail to graduate high school or attend college at a rate that is consistent with unaffected children or, for that matter, consistent with their intellectual abilities. They often struggle to transition successfully into the work place.

With an eye toward the future, we evaluate children examining not just their current problems but also the risks these problems pose for adult life. For children with learning disabilities, independent of other emotional or behavioral problems, the road to successful vocation and happiness in life is often difficult. When the prognosis is adverse, parents request and hope that helping professionals can, through medical, psychological, behavioral and educational interventions, improve their child's future.

In general, helping professionals have been trained to undertake the role of futurists through the use of a deficit or weakness-based model. That is, we are trained to measure symptoms, evaluate problems, determine

diagnoses, and set about to improve future outcomes. Traditionally, improving outcomes has been equated with reducing symptoms. This is the essence of the deficit model. If we identify what is wrong, for example, the child cannot read, we can better understand the child's functioning and future risks. We can then set out to fix the symptoms and in the process improve the future.

While this model has served well, both in identifying what is wrong and prescribing deficit-based interventions resulting in the relief of symptoms, unfortunately this model has not been found to positively affect the future of children with learning disabilities. An emerging body of research reports, that within the group of children with learning disabilities, which comprises 15% of all children, some transition successfully and happily into adult life.

A key question is what comprises the formula for success? What leads one child with a significant history of learning disabilities to assume a successful vocation while so many others struggle to transition effectively into the workplace. The answer may surprise you. The factors that predict resilience or good outcome despite risk for children with learning disabilities do not appear to be primarily associated with their tutorial experiences but more likely associated with a variety of factors within the child and immediate environment. Long-term studies that have included youth with learning disabilities have found that several protective factors increase the probability of good life outcome. These include:

1. Temperamental characteristics that help individuals with learning disabilities elicit positive responses from a variety of caring persons: parents, teachers, friends, spouses or co-workers.

2. Developing what we have referred to as an island of competence, a special skill or talent that helps these individuals to be

successful and appreciated for their contributions.

3. Characteristics and care-giving styles of parents, especially mothers who nurture self-esteem in their children by providing a consistent home environment, a sense of security and nurturance.

4. Supportive adults outside the home, including educators who foster trust and act as gatekeepers for the future.

5. Openings or opportunities at major life transitions that, as Dr. Emmy Werner has pointed out in her longitudinal research, set the majority of individuals with learning disabilities in her study on a path to successful adult adaptation.

In this article we briefly explain the importance of developing a strength-based model and offer a number of suggestions for parents and teachers of children with learning disabilities. Rather than take a deficit approach, we focus on building strengths and on those qualities that have predicted good life outcomes for children with learning disabilities. Please be assured we are not minimizing the importance of early identification of problems or appropriate educational support. Rather, we are suggesting that absent an equal focus on resilience qualities, potential success is significantly less. Thus, we urge a balance between interventions addressing symptom relief and those addressing long-term outcome. We suggest that a balanced approach affords equal attention to what is right and to what is wrong. Keep in mind that when children leave school and prepare to enter their adult lives they are not lined up and asked their worst subject and most annoying behavior, then promptly provided a job requiring the two. It is just the opposite. In life, we find happiness and success by learning to make the most of our strengths or islands of competence. In fact, our strengths can serve as powerful forces, as researchers have demonstrated, significantly minimizing the negative impact of problems.

Resilience and the Resilient Mindset

The focus upon strengths in helping overcome adversity has been referred to in the research literature as resilience. Resilience is

the capacity to deal successfully with the obstacles that confront us on life's road while maintaining a straight and true path towards our goals. Resilience factors have been demonstrated to increase the probability that children facing a host of adversities in their lives can persevere and experience future life successfully and with satisfaction. Such children have developed what we refer to as a *resilient mindset*. They view the world in an optimistic and hopeful way; feel special and appreciated in the eyes of significant others; have learned to set realistic goals and expectations for themselves; and believe that they have the ability to solve problems and make decisions. Thus they are more likely to view mistakes, hardships, and obstacles as challenges to confront rather than as stressors to avoid. They rely on growth-fostering coping strategies. Though aware of their weaknesses and vulnerabilities, they also recognize their strengths and talents.

Resilient children are empathic and possess the skills to develop satisfying interpersonal skills and are able to seek out assistance and nurturance in a comfortable manner. Very importantly, they are able to define the aspects of their lives they have control over and to focus their energy and attention on these rather than on factors over which they have little, if any influence.

It is beyond the scope of this article to review in depth the research literature focusing on resilience, but there is emerging evidence that parents and teachers exert a significant, positive impact in helping their at-risk children develop a resilient mindset, a mindset that has an impact not only upon current functioning, but ultimately on future success and happiness. In the remainder of this article we offer five strategies to help children with learning disabilities become resilient.

1. Teach Empathy by Practicing Empathy.

If our children are to communicate effectively and develop satisfying interpersonal relationships, it is essential that we help them develop empathy. Empathy is viewed as one of the cornerstones of emotional intelligence as described by Dr. Daniel Goleman. Empathy may be understood as the ability to put oneself inside the shoes of another person and to see the

world through that person's eyes. While empathy is an essential interpersonal skill, operating in all relationships, it is far more difficult to achieve than most of us realize. This is especially true when we are upset, angry, or disappointed with another person. When we are empathic, we not only ask ourselves what we hope to accomplish when we say or do things, but as importantly, we consider the following questions, *Are we saying or doing things in a way that our child will be most responsive to hearing us?*

We teach our children empathy when we listen closely to what they have to say; when we validate their statements and when we say and do things in a way in which they will be most responsive to learning from us. We avoid preaching, lecturing, or offering comments that our children may take to be judgmental and accusatory. Guiding questions we must pose for ourselves include, *Would we want anyone to speak with us the way we are speaking with our children? How would our children describe us at this moment? How would we hope they described us?*

As an example, a parent may want to motivate a child with learning disabilities to work more diligently and attempt to achieve this goal by exhorting the child to *try harder*. While the parent may be well intentioned, the comment *try harder* is frequently experienced as accusatory. Consequently, the parent's remark may actually backfire, leading to further resentment. An empathic statement might be, *I know you are having trouble with your math homework, many kids do, maybe together we can figure out what will help*. We must remember that the development of empathy provides the foundation for effective communication and interpersonal skills. These are vital features of a resilient mindset.

2. Teach Responsibility by Encouraging Contributions.

If children are to develop a feeling of accomplishment and pride, we must provide them with ample opportunities for assuming responsibilities, especially responsibilities that strengthen their belief that they are making a contribution to their home, school, or community. We have found that enlisting youngsters

with learning disabilities to use their *islands of competence* in pursuits such as tutoring younger children, painting murals on the wall of the school, watering plants, bringing messages to the office, or going on Walks for Hunger, helps them to feel that they are making a positive difference. This serves to reinforce their motivation and self-esteem as they witness concrete examples of their achievements.

3. Teach Decision-making and Problem-solving Skills that Reinforce Self-discipline.

An essential component of resilience and high self-esteem is the belief that one possesses some control over one's life. To acquire this attitude of ownership, children require experiences from which they can learn and apply decision-making and problem-solving skills. We can encourage them to articulate problem areas; to think of possible solutions; to consider what solution might work best; and to attempt that solution and to assess the results. This can be accomplished by involving children in discussions of how best to solve particular problems such as issues with friends; when and in what order to do their homework; ways to solve problems with a sibling; or asking them to do research on a particular project.

The use of problem solving skills can also be enlisted in the important process of discipline with the goal of promoting self-discipline. One way we can accomplish this goal is to obtain the input of children in the development of rules and consequences that affect their lives at home and at school (children are often more likely to remember and follow rules and develop self-control when they are involved within reason in participating in the creation of these rules and consequences). These kinds of activities empower children by reinforcing a sense of ownership, commitment, accountability, and self-discipline. Dr. Paul Gerber has found that a key factor that contributes to success in adults with learning disabilities is a realistic sense of personal control of events.

4. Offer Encouragement and Positive Feedback.

Resilience is nurtured when we convey realistic appreciation to children and help them to feel they are very special and important to us. By doing so, we become in the words of Dr. Julius Segal, *charismatic adults* in their lives,

that is, adults from who children gather strength. Spending special time alone with our children, writing them a brief note of love or appreciation, or hugging them are examples of this strategy. Youngsters with learning disabilities are frequently given the label special needs. While we recognize the importance of this label in securing services and funding , we also believe that we could use similar words in a banner that would appear on all of our homes and schools, namely, *every child who enters these doors needs to feel special.*

5. *Help children Deal with Mistakes.*

The fear of making mistakes and looking foolish is one of the strongest roadblocks to developing high self-esteem and resilience. Children with learning disabilities are often vulnerable to feelings of defeat and are likely to retreat from tasks that may lead to failure. We must help our children realize that mistakes are an important ingredient in the process of learning. We can do this in a variety of ways; such as responding to children's mistakes by showing them the correct way to solve a problem and by not saying such demeaning comments such as *Don't you have any brains?* or *You never do anything right!* At the very beginning of the school year before teachers have taught any lesson or given any work, they can introduce the topic of mistakes in the learning process. In the discussion, teachers can share memories of their own anxieties about

making mistakes when they were students and involve the class in a discussion about the best ways to insure that students don't worry about making a mistake. Placing the issue about the fear of making mistakes out in the open typically serves to lessen its potency, thereby increasing opportunities for learning.

Our Legacy to the Next Generation

The worries of parents and educators concerning children with learning disabilities are well founded. The goal of raising resilient children is important to insure future success for those with learning disabilities. Resilience is linked to a sense of optimism, ownership, and personal control. We have learned from both personal and professional experience that we must serve as the *charismatic adults* in children's lives, providing them with opportunities that reinforce their islands of competence and feelings of self-worth. The emotional strength, confidence, and other qualities of resilience possessed by children with learning disabilities in partnership with appropriate educational support are the best predictors of life success.

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